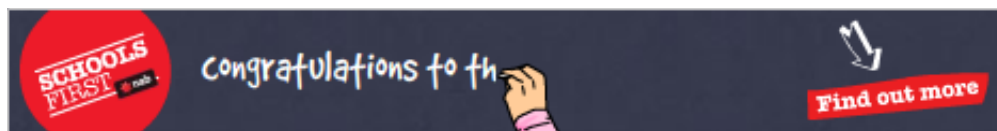




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Reading between the lines

February 16, 2009

Bob Hillman explores the meaning of context and the power of provocative and thoughtful writing.

THE new English course that began at year 12 last year brought a new and innovative approach to writing. Although there appeared to be some consternation about the expectations, most teachers and students found area of study 2 - "Creating and Presenting" - to be informative, challenging and satisfying. The result of this part of the course is a variety of insightful and provocative writing in a range of approaches.

The new course offers a choice of four contexts published in the VCAA book list: "Encountering conflict", "The imaginative landscape", "Exploring issues of identity and belonging" and "Whose reality?" Each context contains a list of four texts, two of which must be studied throughout the year.

Students are required to produce up to three assessed pieces in each of units 3 and 4. In unit 3 this is worth 30 per cent of the unit assessment, but 50 per cent in unit 4. A third of the final examination is dedicated to context.

The key to success in this area of study is to consider the inter-relationship between three crucial ingredients: the quality of the writing, the quality of the ideas and the ability to deal with prompts. Most importantly, this part of the course is about writing. In many respects, it has replaced the writing folio of the previous course. Throughout the year students will be given the opportunity to improve their writing and to develop a better understanding of writing in different contexts and for different audiences.

Many schools select the option of writing three pieces in unit 3 and, in this case, there is the opportunity for a range of approaches. This should not, however, be the only chance for students to write. Students may choose to keep a journal, trying different approaches and styles, evaluating their own work, discovering what works for them and the areas they most need to work on. The assessed outcomes are the product of a term's work and for wise students it will be a polished piece or pieces of writing where the skills and style have been developed throughout the unit.

One of the more interesting and challenging aspects to "Creating and Presenting" is that the VCAA does not offer detailed information about how the context is to be analysed and investigated. Thus, each class around the state has the freedom to deal with the topics in its own way.

This gives rise to diverse and interesting interpretations. Through wider reading, many have augmented their study of context with philosophical, psychological and sociological perspectives in order to ground the study in a theoretical basis. Examples of these include Maslow's *Hierarchy of Needs* ("Conflict" and "Identity"), Fromm's *The Art of Loving* ("Identity") or Descartes and Kant for "Whose Reality?"

It is crucial that student writing is sophisticated in both the control of language in the selected approach to writing and in the ideas that are being presented. One of the problems that emerged for some students last year was that discussions were too generalised and offered little insight into the context or prompt other than the most superficial ideas.

A year's study of multiple texts and discussions surrounding the context should offer students ample

opportunity for profound insights into the context and these should emerge in their writing. There can be no good writing without good ideas.

The texts listed under each context offer students the opportunity to explore the way in which their context is revealed via film, novel or poetry. They provide the basis on which an exploration of context can be developed and the writing itself must be informed by one or more of these texts.

While the pieces of writing must be informed by the selected text or texts, the focus is on the writing. "Informed" does not mean a student is compelled to refer specifically to the text, although there is also nothing that prohibits direct reference. It may be that key ideas are internalised and presented in a unique and fresh manner. Or it may be that a student is guided by the style of writer in presenting their ideas.

Some students seem concerned about whether it is preferable to use more than one text in their writing. The reality is that some approaches to writing and some ideas for presenting a concept work better using multiple texts, while others are better presented relying on a single text. The quality of writing and the quality of ideas are more important than the number of texts used. (This is equally true of any external material that students and teachers have found relevant in their study of the context.) It is important, however, to practise integrating multiple sources in a fluent and seamless manner if the intention is to use more than one text. It comes down to developing good writing skills.

In addition to the final pieces, students are required to present a "reflective commentary" with their school-assessed outcomes. This is a valuable tool to reflect and explore the way in which the piece has been written and to critically discuss the way in which students have gone about planning, constructing and editing their writing.

It may include a discussion of the use of imagery, metaphor or symbolism within the piece and comment on various authorial decisions that have been made to create the best piece of thinking and writing that a student can produce. It is important to remember, however, that there is no provision for a reflective commentary or a statement of intention in the examination and assessors will not take these into consideration when marking the context section of the examination.

The final area to consider when creating a piece of writing for context is the prompt. Unlike a highly prescriptive topic from the study of text, a prompt is a springboard for a piece of writing. Students must deal with the essential idea and direction of the prompt but there is no need to slavishly deconstruct the prompt and carefully interpret each word.

It offers students a direction, but at the same time, it must not be ignored. In last year's examination, for example, the prompt for "Identity and belonging" directed students to create a piece of writing that focused on relationships when exploring that context and constructing their pieces of writing.

Throughout the year, students can collect ideas and develop statements about their context. These are essentially prompts and the variety of statements will offer students different ideas and perhaps different approaches to their writing. It should be noted that in the VCE examination descriptors it is described as follows: "Students will be required to base their writing on unseen stimulus material or prompts associated with the ideas and/or arguments suggested by the four texts set for each context."

This suggests that it is not inconceivable that there are visual stimuli on the examination to create pieces of writing rather than written prompts. The message should be clear for not only this area of study, but all parts of the English course. Do not be limited in developing skills and knowledge. Do not expect a particular topic

or prompt on the examination. Be well prepared for anything through a mature and conscientious approach to the entire course.

Students should be bold and confident in their writing, not overly conservative in the way they present their ideas on their context. For some an imaginative approach is perfect, for others a more expository approach may work. But each student must find his or her own strengths, address weaknesses and write in a provocative, sophisticated and entertaining manner to show off the skills and knowledge gained through writing and thinking about the landscape, conflict, reality or identity.

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